

# Tempered Down

On temperaments, communities and conflicts in the river fisheries of Bihar, amidst rigidly persistent caste and class discrimination

**S**ocial and institutional interactions impinge significantly on how resource declines are experienced by fisherfolk, as local scarcity of resources can aggravate and transform historically entrenched conflicts over fishing rights, access and ownership. Owing to conflicts emerged from historical relations, or institutional changes, or state-driven policies, a dichotomous ‘fishing communities versus the rest of the world’ framing of the problem is commonplace.

The primary assumption in this outlook is that the heterogeneity of socio-cultural practices within these fishing communities could, or should,

to impoverished fisheries in terms of both quantity and quality in India’s Gangetic basin. In the lower Gangetic floodplains of Bihar, rigidly persistent caste and class discrimination has formed the proverbial backdrop against which river fishery conflicts have been emerging, changing, and continuing. Importantly, fishing rights, access to fishing grounds, and ownership conflicts cannot still be separated from floodplain systems of land ownership (for example, freehold tenure, tenancy, etc.) and control of riparian productivity by powerful and influential landowning people, locally called the ‘bosses’.

Fishing communities in Bihar, mostly landless and marginalized, eke out a difficult existence with no meaningful institutional structure to bind them together. The common district boundary of Bhagalpur in eastern Bihar, and a somewhat fluid political identity of being from the Nishad or Mallah castes are the only things that may be held as constant for these people. But otherwise nothing seems adequate to group them: the label of a homogeneous ‘fishing community’ risks undermining the complexity and diversity of fisherfolk that reside in the Barari, Kahalgaon, and Naugachhia towns of Bihar (See Map).

## Diversity of fishing

Differences in geographic locations and ecological specificities of ‘places’ they fish in also correlate with a diversity of fishing practices and seasonal movement patterns. Owing to these divergences, their interactions with different state and non-state institutions influence the variability of ways through which their local fishing grounds are

**Fishing communities in Bihar, mostly landless and marginalized, eke out a difficult existence...**

be glossed over to focus on broader inequalities and injustices meted by the state and other institutions. But often this leads only to a coarse-resolution awareness of fishing conflicts and their potential outcomes for human livelihoods.

Often there is a need to look deeper at the micro-scale, at what goes on not just between, but also within, conflict-ridden fishing communities. This becomes particularly necessary for a nuanced understanding of fisheries systems situated within highly stratified and unequal societies, and threatened ecological settings.

The basin-level alteration of river-flow regimes by dams, barrages, engineering developments and pollution has contributed significantly

This article is by **Nachiket Kelkar** ([rainmaker.nsk@gmail.com](mailto:rainmaker.nsk@gmail.com)) of Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), India and **Subhasis Dey** ([subhasisvbrec98@gmail.com](mailto:subhasisvbrec98@gmail.com)), Department of Botany, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, India

controlled. The settlements bear different 'temperaments', which also represent other fishing communities across the Gangetic floodplains, and which we attempt to sketch out, based on our long-term interactions, both formal and informal.

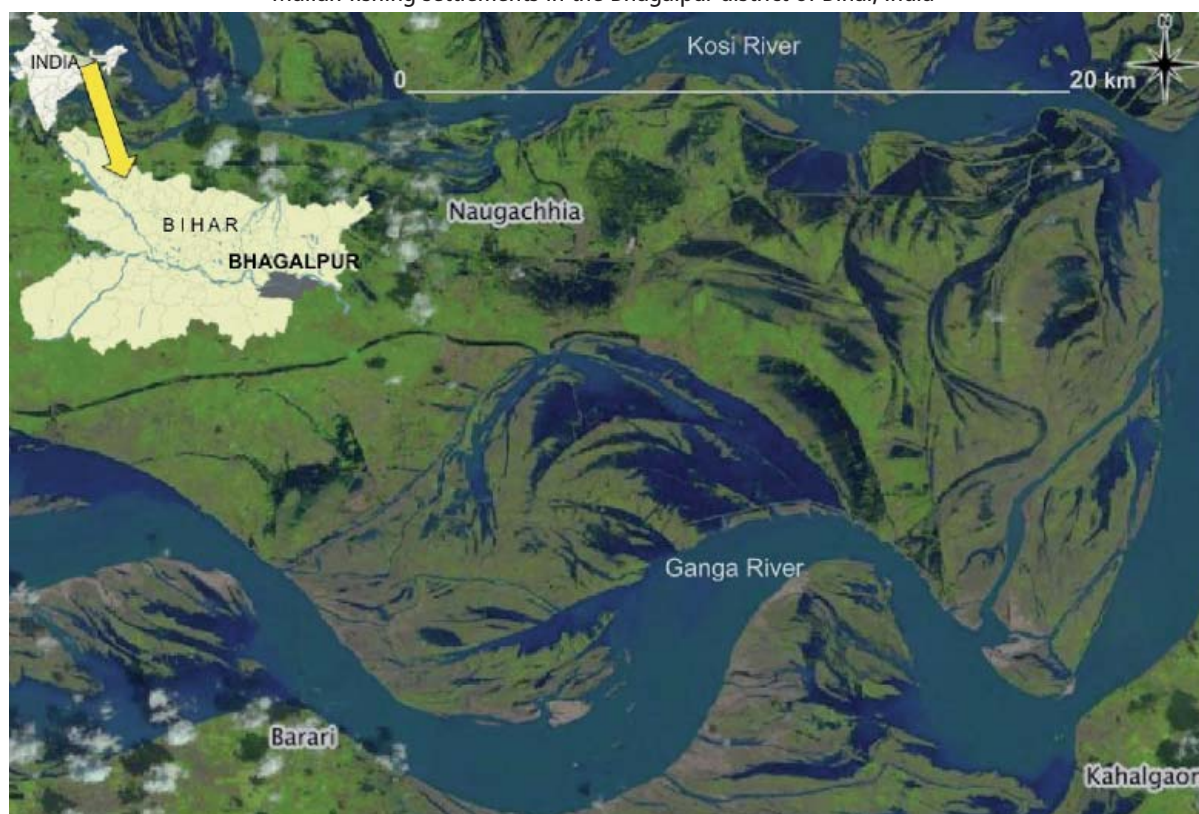
Table 1 compares the fishing practices, access to fishing grounds, movements, group associations and experiences of conflicts faced through interactions with fishers from the three settlements. We also describe their responses to resource declines and intergroup interactions, to dwell on the heterogeneous meanings of 'fishing community' for people, despite a common history.

The river fisheries of Bihar shifted from a private regime to an open-access regime in 1991, following the Ganga Mukti Andolan, a social movement that sprung up in the 1980s, demanding the overthrow of private control of rivers in Bihar called *Panidari* (water-lording). The fishers of Kagzi Tola in Kahalgaon were at the forefront of this movement and, in a sense, they represented the

whole fishing community of Bhagalpur district. The Andolan did succeed as private control was overthrown in 1991 by the state, but it failed on account of actually creating alternative systems of property rights or community management of river fisheries, landing up fishers in a 'free-for-all' open-access situation. It also did not do enough to resolve issues of caste identity that underlay the floodplain-dwelling groups that participated in it.

Kahalgaon fishers travel far and wide, and always have to fish, despite the primary drive and weakness for hunting and eating the flesh of soft-shelled river turtles. This drive takes them to the floodplains of the Gandak River in western Bihar and the Ghaghra in Uttar Pradesh, where turtles are still in relatively better numbers than in the Ganga. Some fishers have even travelled to the Yamuna and Chambal, and some even to Goa to help capture and kill sea turtles. These long travels are accompanied by double-faced actions: often these fishers pay rent

Map: Map showing the Barari, Naugachhia and Kahalgaon towns with Mallah fishing settlements in the Bhagalpur district of Bihar, India



to local bosses and criminal gangs to fish (whose practices they hate so much) to gain access to fish and hunt in their territories. However, the same Kagzi Tola fishers do not take kindly to other fisherfolk coming into, and fishing around, the rocky islands at Kahat, their fishing territory.

The river is perhaps the deepest at this point anywhere on the Ganga, has complex habitats, a stable channel, eddies, and counter-currents where several fish species reside in good numbers. The strong guard of this productive fishery itself goes against their demand for 'exclusive rights for fishing castes'.

The Naugachhia fishers are the other extreme of Kahalgaon but because Naugachhia is not located on the riverbank, fishing in small bands in the Ganga and Kosi rivers (in other fishers' grounds) is what they practise. They go out to Bhagalpur or somewhere along the Kosi coast for several days, only to return home during festivities or illnesses. Used to being 'floating outsiders', friendliness is an essential survival strategy, and applies to everyone they meet:—other fishers, conservationists, and criminal gangs as well.

The mood in the Barari fishing settlement near Bhagalpur city is one of general agreement, irrespective of discussions. There is no surplus anger or warmth, but rather there is a patient, measured behaviour maintained in interactions. Though these fishers too regularly fish in the river, they are relatively distracted and indifferent. Threat is a routine part of life, without question. They regularly see the local bosses, partake with their fish catch when threatened, and report these incidents as if these were norms and hence acceptable, "yeh to chalta hai (this keeps happening)".

The Ganga at Bhagalpur is a busy river: there is the long Vikramshila bridge over which vehicles keep moving noisily; there are waterway-dredger vessels digging up the river every now and then; there is a highly polluted side-channel that takes the sewage and garbage from Bhagalpur city, and pilgrims, motorboats, crowded ghats and markets make up for the other elements.

Three settlements that once shared a common history of oppression and poverty show divergent temperaments as they confront their gravely insecure livelihoods in a rapidly degrading river and dangerous fishery setting. With a

Table 1. A comparison of the characteristics of three Mallah fishing settlements in the Bhagalpur district indicates a gradient of differences in fishing practices and preferences

Name of Settlement	Sub-caste	Range of Influence	Grouping patterns	Fishing effort & practices	Propensity to exit from fishery	Role in resistance	Tolerance for other fishers
KagziTola (Kahalgaon)	Banpar	Ganga River and some tributaries in Bihar, Bengal and eastern UP	Mixed groups, corporate groups, bands	Main river, localized around Kahalgaon but widespread fishing across the region	Low, shift to labour and exit known only during extreme years	Led	Low
Makkhatakiya (Naugachhia)	Nishad	Kosi, Ganga rivers	Bands	Inlets and side-channels with vegetation, ponds and floodplain wetlands	Moderate to High, shift to pond fisheries and wage labour	Supported	Usually, they are the 'other' fishers, High
Barari (Bhagalpur)	Gorhi (Mahaldar)	Barari area	Family groups	Main river, highly localized	High, many have shifted to local alternative occupations	Passive	High

NACHIKET KELKAR



Fishing in River Ganges, India. Fishing communities in Bihar, mostly landless and marginalized, eke out a difficult existence with no meaningful institutional structure to bind them together

75

continuing exodus, the number of fishers actively fishing today might be less than 30 per cent of the number 10-15 years ago. For those who remain, importantly, the socio-ecological setting and lived experience have, at least partly, shaped their variable attitudes. What is striking is that these differences severely limit their ability to reflect critically on the open-access cage they are stuck in.

In this context, the uniform application of fisheries policies, schemes and community-wide extension programmes might achieve heterogeneous outcomes. A closer look at how temperaments are formed, maintained and expressed in response to conflicts appears essential in planning sustained dialogue with communities living on the edge of declining riverine fisherie. 3

#### For more



[www.dukeupress.edu/where-the-river-ends/?viewby=title](http://www.dukeupress.edu/where-the-river-ends/?viewby=title)

**Muehlmann, S. 2013. *Where the River Ends: Contested Indigeneity in the Mexican Colorado delta*. Duke University Press: USA, p. 220**

[www.cambridge.org/core/books/life-on-the-ganga/B8459012B50449DEB8807BB87F593241](http://www.cambridge.org/core/books/life-on-the-ganga/B8459012B50449DEB8807BB87F593241)

**Assa Doron, 2013. *Life on the Ganga Boatmen and the Ritual Economy of Banaras*. Cambridge University Press**